

to promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which
here in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church;
provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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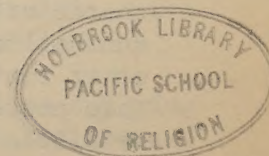
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THE COMMUNITY AS PERSON

By Griscom Morgan*



The sociologist George Peter Murdock made a survey of many societies and from it derived his sociologically objective and exact definition of community as one of the two universal social groupings of human, and of much of prehuman, society. The character of this universal group which he names "community" has involved living together in nearly all the activities of life in face-to-face relationships of groups not larger than a few hundred or at most several thousand in number. We use the word community for many meanings, but just as the word "family" is used in "the family of nations" without spoiling its use to designate a fundamental human social unit, so the use of the word community in other relationships should not destroy its clear and specific meaning as the name of a distinct and universal unit of human society.

Thanks to scientific exactitude in describing what until recently has been a universal characteristic of human living, we can know with assurance that in speaking of the small community we are not using an each-man-for-himself definition, nor are we speaking of a mystical and doubtful abstraction any more than we do so in speaking of such a chemical compound as water. But we must do more than pin down the community as a fundamental grouping. We must establish in our minds the less obvious but no less real qualities and characteristics that make the community so essential a unit of human life, even for the future, just as in studying the nature of water we must recognize the less obvious elements that make it a substance eternally real in our experience.

One of the first essentials to understanding the community is a concept little understood by people under the domination of a highly disintegrated and individualistic culture. That concept is "personality." The community -- to the degree that it is a real community and not merely a group of people -- has a being and spirit that lives of itself, although not apart from its members. In primitive communities that fact was partially personified in the gods of the community. Those gods were not only real in the minds of community members, but they represented something as objectively real as the individual in the community -- the living personality of the community itself. So real is this "person" that when it dies members of primitive communities say, "We are dead." Just as a blow

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on the head will kill a dog, though most of its cells have been untouched, so a shock to a community often kills a community, though its individual members were not physically harmed at first. The disintegration of primitive communities on contact with more powerful cultures, and the following disappearance or great reduction of the population, is common knowledge.

Our national and world society is knit together by countless individual and group associations that cross community, city, and national boundaries. This is true in science, religion, art, politics, business, education, and in many other fields. Many such associations, particularly religious, develop some of the characteristics of community. Civilization depends upon these lines of intercommunication just as the human body depends on circulatory and nervous systems and other controls integrating and facilitating the function of cells and organs. This process of "extra-community association" in society, while it enriches and vitalizes the community, brings centripetal disintegrative forces into the home and the community, forces that must be balanced by centrifugal integrative force that will maintain the unity and integrity of the basic units of human association. There can be no question of "either--or" about the specialized and the general relationships in society. Both are necessary for a high order of civilization.

Every person, every institution, and every social group constantly seek integration; that is, it seeks to bring all parts or phases into harmonious unit. The process of integration of social personality has been most penetrating and inclusive in the small community as it existed throughout human history until recent times. An isolated Pueblo Indian village is a surviving example. The life of the village is not divided into social, economic, religious, and governmental functions. It is all one. Though integration on a far larger scale must also be achieved, while other groupings are also necessary, the small community will continue to be a vital focus in which all areas of life and society must be integrated into a living social organism. Only when so integrated can men and groups of men find a basic social relationship and the emotional security and experience which they need.

The idea of attributing personality to the community is often resented because it is felt that if the community does have a life of its own that transcends the thought, personality, and will of its members, it must then displace the integrity and freedom of the individual, becoming totalitarian on a small scale. This view is exemplified in the report of the Conference on the Community and Christian Education, by Tilford T. Swearingen, reviewed in this issue. The conference acknowledged that society has "as its essential units, not only individuals and families, but communities." But the point of this recognition is largely lost in the subsequent statement: "It will be recognized throughout that the community must be changed and transformed because of its effect on people and not as an end in itself." Like individual people, for the community to develop fully and normally requires that it be loved for itself. To refuse the community such love causes it to decline and even to disintegrate as individual members and groups are drawn away by self-interest.

We are deeply obligated to one of the most valuable observations of anthropologists for an understanding of how individual and community integrity are consistent one with another. Many anthropologists have independently observed that the healthier and more stable primitive societies maintained a balance between the independence and integrity of the personality of the individual and the integrity of the personality of the community. Both are ends. Neither oversteps the bounds of the other, just as in a strong healthy family the family is loved for itself.

Parents respect the independence and personality of their children and all avoid domineering and possessiveness.

Thus we find that, rather than destroying the freedom and status of the individual, in the long run the small community is a major area of his opportunity for freedom. For people do not generally have freedom over themselves or their environment except as they live in a community small enough so that they can share intimately in forming this whole life environment. Only through interrelation and integration on this small scale, and by the capacity thus developed for participation on a larger scale, can we have true democracy. In the absence of such participation learned at first hand on a small scale, democracy degenerates into a process of manipulation by "leaders."

The qualities of the age-old community have been thought of as applying to groups of any size, ranging to many millions. People cannot learn to love and live by abstractions. The bonds of real love begin in personal relationships and associations. "How can you love God whom you have not seen if you love not your neighbor whom you have seen?" Only by learning to love a knowable community can we by analogy extend such love to larger social units such as city, country, or mankind.

In its economic life also we may compare a community to a family. It is generally recognized that a family needs an economy of its own, with its own budget and its own management. It must maintain sound relation between income and outgo, or it moves toward family poverty or bankruptcy. To whatever extent the state takes over the management of the family budget and family economy the independence and the cohesion of the family are destroyed, and it loses some of the essential quality of a family. This having a budget of its own does not in any way prevent the family being a part of a larger social unit with budgetary control on a larger scale. On the contrary, if each family competently manages its own budget, the financial burdens of the society will be much simplified.

Similarly a good community needs to have an economy of its own, not in isolation, but in relation to others and to larger social units. To the extent that the economics of each community is soundly managed by and within the community, the management burden of the state is reduced. Where the community economy and its management are taken over by the state, the community loses an essential condition of its life and tends to atrophy.

We repeat that from the requirement that each community have its own economy it does not follow that the community lives self-sufficiently or can dispense with participating in larger economic and social entities. But if the contradictions of our economy of scarcity in the midst of abundance are resolved by displacing the community economy with a welfare economy in which the state, or nationwide private corporations, take over most of the economic functions of the community, a vital element of the community disappears, and it ceases to be a whole and vital unit of human life.

It is commonly recognized that hardly any long-existing local Communist economy permitted that freedom and integrity to the individual and group that is essential to a progressive society. For that reason the communism of the local community is not much more satisfactory than communism of the nation. The opposite extreme is also unsatisfactory. Unrestrained individual capitalism in the local community has been destructive to the community in the same way that nation-

wide uncontrolled capitalism has so often destroyed social harmony in the nation. Capitalism by definition concentrates the ownership and control of productive wealth and finance into the hands of a class distinct from the community, even if in it. It is for this reason that crude capitalism has so commonly destroyed the community where its characteristic folkways have penetrated. The Newsletter of the Institute of Ethnic Affairs and Dr. Halliday's book, Psychosocial Medicine give objective evidence of the effects of crude capitalism upon the community and its economy. We need a superior alternative to both crude capitalism and state socialism.

Similarly we can see influences toward community disintegration in present-day management of education and religion. Until recent times education and religion have been dominantly community functions and major foci of community life. Where school and church thrust their way into the community, undertaking to take over its general functions without regard for its whole personality, they weaken or destroy the community in proportion to their success, and in the process they reduce the value of their own work. The school has sought to compensate for rural exploitation and poverty by consolidation from the beginning of the school years in order to give more satisfactory teaching on a mass-production basis. It has often been assumed by school men that the small community could be displaced by larger impersonal masses which they continue to call the community. Some observers are finding that loss of intimate community oversight and influence is having harmful effects on children. The loss of the local grade school also means loss of community experiences for many parents and contributes to disintegration of community consciousness.

Religion is intrinsic to community. It has been said that the very topic of religion is individuality in community. The church, by considering itself as the community, has failed to recognize the integrity and autonomy of the personality of the community. It has considered the community as important chiefly as the environment of its charges, the church members. Seeking to displace the "person" of the community, it has weakened it and contributed to its disintegration. Jesus had preached the gospel of the kingdom of God in which both individual and community must "serve." However, the church commonly preaches the gospel only of individual salvation.

These are some of the more important age-old criteria of small community realization, and they suggest some of the causes of its breakdown. The question follows, Is it realistic to employ those criteria in seeking to establish healthy communities in the future? If the community has been so vulnerable to the influences of our times, is there any reason to expect that it can again come in its own? Must it be attenuated by all the new developments such as suburban living, absentee capitalism, welfare state services and trends, loss of role in education and religion, and ever-increasing impersonalism, specialization, mobility and transience?

Essential as is the small community to a good society, it cannot stand alone against empire and exploitation. Where its isolation has been overcome without losing too much of its integrity -- as has happened in Denmark largely because of the intercommunity folk school -- the community has increased its strength through association and intercommunication and has been the foundation of individual freedom and of national strength.